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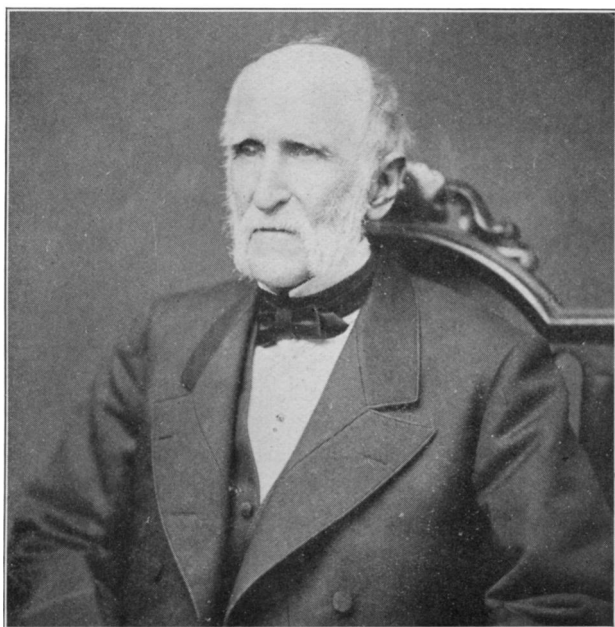
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JOHN WANTON CASEY.

JOHN WANTON CASEY.

BY ELLA MORRIS KRETSCHMAR.

An address before the Tazewell County Historical Society.*

It was from the staid old community of East Greenwich, Rhode Island, with blue Narragansett Bay beating at the foot of its hill, that John Wanton Casey, who was born in that village on June 19, 1803, fared forth to Illinois in 1831, a mighty journey, a thrilling adventure in that day.

His ancestors had been identified since 1658 with Rhode Island's economic, political and social history. His father, Wanton Casey, being in affluent circumstances, was able to give his numerous family the best education that could be commanded, and such other advantages of culture and refinement as the times afforded. Not the least of these was the privilege of meeting in their home the men of letters of political and economic prominence of the New England of that day.

Of Wanton Casey, *The Magazine of New England History* says: "In 1774, when but 14 years of age, he was one of the incorporators named in the charter of the Kentish Guards, and upon the breaking out of the Revolution served with his company in the field until January, 1779, when he

* NOTE.—This biographical sketch of John Wanton Casey has been compiled by his three children, Mary L. Cummings, Edwin A. Casey, and Ella M. Kretschmar.

While the obligation of presenting such a record for filing in the State and Tazewell County Historical Societies was pressing,—since the subject played a large and fine part in the history and development of the region in which he lived,—yet on account of the nearness of relationship the obligation had of necessity to be not only modestly approached but written with greatest care, each fact used scrutinized and weighed with the utmost exactness, and contributing circumstances or background as unassumingly set forth as was consistent with sincerity. In short, a less interested biographer from the mass of material available would have deduced a much more prideful history, but perhaps on that account less acceptable to the modest, scholarly gentleman who is its subject.

was sent by his father to Nantes, France, to acquire a sound mercantile education in the business house of Jonathan Williams, agent of the Colonies in that city. He remained in France, spending a year or more in Paris. * * * In 1783 he returned to East Greenwich by way of London."

The History of Washington and Kent Counties, Rhode Island, make extensive mention of Wanton Casey, among other things the following: "Wanton Casey was the son of Silas Casey in East Greenwich in the last half of the last century (18th). In one of his father's ships near the close of the War of the Revolution Mr. Casey was sent abroad to finish his education, and especially to learn the French language. For this purpose he resided in Paris for two years just prior to the exciting times of the Revolution in that country. * * * No man was more identified with East Greenwich than Wanton Casey. His house was on the corner of Main and Division streets, a prominent object as you enter the town from the north. Here Mr. Casey reared a large family and his home was the center of a refined and cultivated circle through all his long life."

John Wanton, though of a distinctly literary and philosophical bent, elected to follow a business career rather than to enter one of the learned professions. At the age of 25 he entered the banking house of one of his father's friends in New York City. It was while thus engaged in learning the banking business along conventional lines that his imagination fell under the lure of the great West, which was represented by pamphlets flooding the East, as the Eldorado of the known world, the land of romance, of unparalleled beauty and of Opportunity, beckoning to the citizens of the Atlantic States and far-off Europe.

After many and grave consultations with his parents, John Wanton finally received their consent to forego an assured future in the East and to cast in his lot and inheritance with the hazards of a new and distinct State. He brought into Illinois \$25,000 for investment, a vast sum in that day, especially for so young a man to administer in an undeveloped region under untried conditions.

It is assumed that the Historical Society of a state values biographies of its pioneers for a two-fold reason: First, as a record of the talents, vision, courage, adventures, hardships, achievements and material substance the individual poured into the hopper of state building; second, for the incidental side-lights on background which help the historian to reconstruct sequentially a history of general conditions during years when records were not kept.

If in this chronicle some experiences and detail not essential to a brief outline history of the subject's life are given, it is to contribute such glimpses of local color incident to the passing years.

It is a matter of conjecture why Illinois instead of old St. Louis, which was the veritable romance of American life of that time, became Mr. Casey's fixed goal. The journey by stage, by canal, and rivers—finally came to an end at Grafton, Illinois, on the Mississippi. Here a long pause of over a year was made, undoubtedly for readjustment and full observation of the new country and conditions. The next move was a trip up the Illinois River, with incidental inspections of bordering regions, until the packet-boat drew into the wharf at Pekin, then called Town Site on account of its favorable location and because it was under discussion for the future capital of the State. Mr. Casey concluded to stop off here for a closer view, which resulted in his deciding to remain permanently, no more promising spot, in truth, having come under his observation in all his journeyings. Its jet-black loam, half-covered by wild flowers, proclaimed it one of the future granaries of the new Western empire. Here he made his home from 1831 until his death, March 18, 1881.

Quantities of land were taken over by Mr. Casey, by purchase outright from the government, for himself, and one of his brothers.

In making his surveys of adjacent regions for land purchases he discovered that the supply of general merchandise and agricultural implements had not kept pace with the

demand. This led him to a decision to open stores at several points—Pekin, Havana, Beardstown, Mackinaw, Sugar Grove, and one as far away as Sangamon County. Not having had practical experience along mercantile lines, he put an experienced man in charge of each store, spending his own time in going from one store to another, checking up his books, and taking orders to be filled on his yearly visit to New York (a trip requiring six weeks) or on his more frequent trips to St. Louis and New Orleans.

Money being scarce, products and commodities were exchanged by the world-old medium of barter. Mr. Casey soon found it necessary to put up warehouses in connection with his stores for the storage of grain, the river being at hand ready to bear such argosies of wealth to selected shipping points.

All of the mercantile ventures were carried on in a large and liberal spirit, which not only expanded the grain business but earned for Mr. Casey the respect and confidence of those he served. In this connection it may be mentioned that he furnished farmers with merchandise and agricultural equipment, waiting on their ability to pay, never once foreclosing a mortgage—as was the practice under similar circumstances in that day.

It was a rich and fascinating life, this sharing in the fundamentals of building a new and great state.

How strange it seems in this day, when Chicago is but four railroad hours distant from Pekin, that Mr. Casey could have actually had the following experience in the 40's. He left Pekin on horseback to go up to a point near present Rockford—then called the Rock River Country—to enter some land. During the afternoon of the third day of his long ride he found himself at a point he had passed some hours before—so discovering that he was lost. As twilight came on he was taken with a chill—occasional ague being a casual concomitant of life in river towns. He felt unable to proceed or even to build a fire for comfort. Dropping to the ground, he unsaddled, and, looping an extra bridle into the

one on the horse, he slipped his arm through it and laid down, with saddle for pillow. High fever followed the chill, aggravated by the dampness of the shelterless open. The torturous hours of semi-delirium were broken at last by the frightened restlessness of the horse, and that most dreaded of all night cries in thinly settled regions—the howls of wolves. Nearer they came and nearer until the awful half-circle of fiery eyes could be seen. Unable to rise, all Mr. Casey could do as they drew still nearer was to shout “Get out! Keep off!” and brandish an arm. Such tactics would have been useless against wolves famished from hunger, but in this case it was enough to hold the skulking cowards at bay. Mr. Casey said the time of danger seemed an eternity, but the creatures must have come in the last hours of the night, for before his voice and strength were wholly exhausted, dawn came, the light sending his tormentors scurrying to a distant wood. With escape, hope and strength mounted. Getting on his feet, with effort lifting his saddle to its place, he walked beside his horse in a new direction. Within an hour or two he saw the curling smoke which in all new countries means shelter, food, and kindly welcome.

As the population of young Pekin and the surrounding country grew and activities extended, Mr. Casey was able in the early 50's to discontinue his mercantile enterprises and devote himself to the grain business exclusively. In the 40's he acquired a half interest in a fleet of canal boats and barges plying between Pekin, St. Louis and New Orleans, which in the 50's went also up to Chicago. The return trips of the boats from the South brought many of the luxuries of life to the shippers, as Mocha and Java coffee in original packets, loaves of sugar, drums of figs, boxes of blue layer raisins, preserved citron and ginger, guava jelly, fine syrups, choice tea, spices, wax candles, brandy and wine, and many other items.

It may be mentioned here that on one occasion, in Mr. Casey's home, when an invoice of such luxuries was being put away in the storeroom, Mrs. Casey noticed, as the coffee was being poured into a stoneware receptacle, a strange

bean. Examining it, she concluded it was the seed of some plant, and at a venture planted it in a flower bed bordering alongside a piazza at the west of the house. It came up, and in course of time proved to be a wisteria vine—probably the first in Illinois—so vigorous in the new rich soil that soon yearly there was a crusade of exquisite purple bloom covering the long lattice to the porch roof.

Mr. Casey retired from business after the Civil War, confining his activities to looking after his widely scattered holdings in real estate. Being public spirited, he also interested himself in matters concerning civic development.

In the 30's there had already been attracted to Central Illinois young men who later were to acquire national, and a few of them international fame. Preeminent among these was the "awkward young lawyer from Springfield," whose name is sacred—and must ever be—on every American lip. He was a well-known figure in Pekin where, when on the circuit, he sometimes lingered on his way to Tremont, then the county seat. He naturally singled out congenial minds, among them Mr. Casey, to whose scholarship he modestly paid much deference. In later life it was a proud memory for Mr. Casey that he had encouraged Great Abraham Lincoln to study Latin, suggested special books of literary value for his reading, and often discussed with him intimately measures that were pending in Springfield or in Washington—when he was a struggling young lawyer, striving in every way to broaden his mental equipment.

In the many years of his residence in Illinois, Mr. Casey knew virtually all the great men of the State, some as familiar acquaintances, others as intimate friends, entertaining many of them in his home. Among these were Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, David Davis, Lovejoy, Cullom, Yates, Logan, Oglesby, Ingersoll, and many others.

At this distance of time it seems rather extraordinary that in a new country a man of Mr. Casey's calibre and attainments did not engage actively in the politics of his day, hold office and otherwise attain goals dear to ambition. The answer is simple. Mr. Casey had strong political instincts,

and profoundest interest in all the vital questions of his time, but instinct and interest were coupled with an unconquerable personal reserve, which went with him through life. There was but one incentive which could move him to forego his prejudice against making a public appearance. His intense Americanism never permitted him to decline when asked to deliver a Fourth of July oration.

But though Mr. Casey shunned everything savoring of the limelight, he felt deeply his political and other public responsibilities, and discharged them fearlessly through the medium of his pen. For years he wrote for the *St. Louis Republican*, and throughout his life in the West wrote for the newspapers of his town and State—never for pay—special articles and editorials. A great mass of these writings were found among his papers when he passed on, but only a small remnant selected at random were preserved. A few of these, perhaps fifty, are at hand at this writing. The compilers of this chronicle are amazed at the quality and vigor of the output of their father's pen, and profoundly regret that the great mass was destroyed.

Before the War, when States Rights and Slavery were the subjects literally raging in all minds, Mr. Casey's pen was dipped in flame, though never sensational; and in the whole range of his later writings he was always clear, forceful and logical. This range included such subjects as *The Significance of Political Parties*; *Reaffirming the Monroe Doctrine*; *Judicial Elections*; *The Currency: Repudiation*; *Resumption*; *Labor and Capital*; *Fiatism*; *Amendment of the Constitution*; *The Presidential Term*; *Congress—Its Personnel*; *Filibustering in Congress*; *The Credit System*; *Communism*; *Sabbath Musings*; *Railroads*; *Community of Language*; *Foreign Travel*.

Though the last of his articles were written in 1879, some of them are strikingly pertinent today. Many of his visions have been fulfilled, others are on the way to fulfillment—as, for example, the deep canal connecting Chicago with the Illinois River—while others are under discussion, as a waterway from the Great Lakes to the Ocean. Some of

his forebodings of fifty years ago alike have been fulfilled, as the dangers of unrestricted immigration, and the giving of full franchise to unassimilated foreigners.

A Whig and later a Republican, Mr. Casey was above all else an ardent American, jealous for our Constitution, our ideals, our best development, proud of our resources, proud of the West, about which he wrote glowing accounts for Eastern publications. He was fearless in discussing our political mistakes, but never without urging the logical remedy. His vision for the West was an acknowledged inspiration to the State builders of his time.

On the death of an uncle in 1864, Mr. Casey inherited that greatly coveted American honor, membership in The Order of the Cincinnati—the organization formed by George Washington for his officers, to be perpetuated forever, by inheritance, through the eldest male heir. He was most proud of this honor, and much pleased to hold the certificate of membership signed by Washington. But his magnanimity was such that when his next younger brother, General Silas Casey, who lived in the East, appealed to him to be allowed to represent him at the yearly meeting and banquet of the Society, in Boston, July Fourth, he consented to the arrangement. He lent him the certificate and wrote a letter delegating him to represent him for the time being—he could not cede his membership by the laws of the organization, nor would he have done so to the prejudice of his son, Edwin A. Casey.

On the death of General Silas Casey, his son, General Thomas L. Casey, assumed that he was to enjoy the same privilege at his uncle's hands that his father had enjoyed; and his uncle, doubly magnanimous, permitted him to do so. But after Mr. Casey's death his son, Edwin A. Casey, was recognized by the Society as his father's successor; and he will be succeeded by his grandson, Hartwell D. Casey.

But alas for magnanimity—the original certificate of membership signed by Washington was not returned to Mr. Edwin A. Casey, it having been stolen from the wall where it hung in General Casey's home.

Having briefly recounted the circumstances of Mr. Casey's coming to Illinois, his business career, and his relations to political and public affairs, it now becomes a pleasant duty to take up the more intimate affairs of his life.

It was in 1843 that Mr. Casey's heart's romance opened up to him—a romance that went with him unmarred to the last hour of his life. The lady was Miss Elizabeth Moore Morris, daughter of Samuel Morris, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, whose antecedents were of Revolutionary importance. Mr. Morris had undertaken the long journey Westward, at the advice of a physician, in search of health for two delicate members of his family, finding it for one on the way. He expected to return to the East within a few months. His objective was Peoria, but the boat breaking down at Pekin, he was detained there for some time, and concluded to remain there permanently, after settling up his affairs in the East.

The pretty tale of the first meeting of the future lovers was told at their own fireside to the compilers of this chronicle many years later. It was on an autumn day, and the Pekin store was its background. To quote from the actors:

He—"I heard a sweet, refined voice asking for shoes, incredibly number twos."

She—"I saw a tall, handsome man with brown curly hair walking behind the counter down to the front from a desk at the back."

Clerk—"We don't keep such small numbers."

He (smiling—"Pardon me, but are you not mistaken in the number?"

She (flushing)—"No, a number two is what I wear"—advancing a little foot clad in a fashionable Eastern shoe.

Followed a glance, long held, and lo, the primitive store was filled with star-dust and dreams instead of the most commonplace things. The little shoes of Turk satin, matching the gown—such funny little shoes, neither high nor low, lacing at the sides and heelless—were tenderly preserved until the youngest of the family had grown to young womanhood.

Hasty marriages were not according to the conventions of that day, and it was after a courtship of over a year that the marriage took place January 3rd, 1845. The objective of the wedding journey was Peoria, by carriage, and when one considers the foundationless roads of 1845, over bottomless black loam, in January, one realizes its hazards were greater than an eventless trip to New York today.

Within two years after his marriage Mr. Casey purchased a site for a home. When his fellow townsmen, whose homes were clustered near the river, heard that it was to be bounded by Elizabeth (Elizabeth street was named after Mrs Casey), Fourth and St. Mary's streets, they protested to him that he was going into the country and would never have neighbors. Two years later, the court house was built on Fourth, Elizabeth and Court streets. The year 1849 saw the completion of the Colonial house (here reproduced) planned by Mr. Casey himself and built not by contract but by day's work to insure greater soundness. It still stands in dignity, though shorn of its beautiful surroundings, a large wing at the back, its window blinds and most of its chimneys—a testimony to the good workmanship of seventy-five years ago. Its grounds were a setting of beautiful trees, shrubbery and flower beds, rose bordered walks, a large lawn to the east, and beyond a garden with fruit trees. On St. Mary's street at the east were the stable and its yard, and a cow pasture was on St. Mary's and Fourth streets. The long frontage on Elizabeth street was bordered by honey locusts and elms. Sloane & Company of New York furnished the house, Vick of Rochester the grounds and garden. It is interesting to note that both of these firms are in existence today, and of prominence.

How commonplace the above facts today. How like a near fairy story in 1849. Such a house and grounds were a departure from the traditions of the times, and region; and the furnishings had to be freighted across the mountains and brought in part by canal and rivers. The result was so rare for the Illinois of that time that people came from near and far to make inspection of both house and grounds.



RESIDENCE JOHN WANTON CASEY.

In this comfortable home, with its pleasant environment, John Wanton and Elizabeth Casey lived their happy lives, reared their children, and entertained their many friends.

Children in their earliest years see their parents with eyes of abounding faith, later with more critical vision. But when they have measured life by experience and observation, they secretly sit in solemn judgment on those who bore them. And so sitting—at over three score years—the children of John and Elizabeth Casey bow in humility and gratitude before them.

They are grateful that the mental atmosphere of their home was ever one of harmony, happiness and high-minded living; that they heard no sordid talk about money, no evil gossip, never a coarse word or jest; that the conversation at the family table was an education in the events and interests of the day; that they learned from their parents that hospitality is both a duty and a pleasure; that charity is a grateful obligation; that strong men are chivalrous; that books are a part of life; and many more articles of faith that have not only sweetened their days, given them fixed standards of judgment, but also have been a rock under their feet in a different age, a different order of living.

Comparing notes, they find certain most amusing conclusions held in common during early childish years, as—that God may be the greatest of all beings, but not as good as our father and mother; that going to church is awful because of sermons, but that many grown people go to sleep; that fathers and mothers read books and magazines to each other, especially on stormy days; that Indian stories are shivery and delicious; that having preachers who talk religion at supper is a hardship that must be cheerfully borne; that fathers always put footstools under mothers' feet when the family circle gathers; that fathers write endless pages about dull things, and read them to mothers; mothers like it!

Hospitality in new countries is not only a social obligation, but part of the happiness of life, and the Caseys' home, from the first, was ever a center of hospitality. In Illinois in the 40's entertaining was beginning to take on the lavish

form which in the 50's reached a point equal to that of Colonial days in the East. Tables groaned, and if they did not, it was because they were over-stoutly built. Why not? In the use of milk, eggs, butter, meats, game of all kinds, vegetables, and wild and cultivated fruits *ad infinitum* there was no slightest need for economy. If there was lacking the sophistication of older cuisines, housewifely methods preserved fine original flavors, and lavishness of variety made up for the things not then procurable in the West. In most homes there were touches of inherited china and silver to add to the creditable recently purchased table service, and perhaps no one in Illinois today can entertain more acceptably than did the host and hostess of the 50's.

One of the later by-phases of hospitality in the Casey home, which delighted Mr. Casey's family on the occasion of evening parties, was the grave manner in which the host would enter the arena where young men were contending for the favor of the belles of the evening, and by his courtliness, gallantry, and charm of conversation, carry off the honors—and the favor of the belles.

During the early years of his life in the West, Mr. Casey organized Pekin's first temperance society, and throughout his life was an abstemious man. But there was one small indulgent spot—how human—in his sweeping denunciation of liquor drinking. He had a measureless admiration for the intellect and oratory of Daniel Webster, as well as an affectionate regard for the man. He was always intensely indignant when Webster's attitude toward the temperance question was referred to in print or public speech; but in the privacy of his home circle he would sometimes mention, half in shame, half in pride, how many drinks Webster could take before making a critical speech, without affecting the lucid clearness of his thought, his unanswerable logic, his charm, and sheer power of oratory.

As has been mentioned, Mr. Casey retired from active business at the end of the Civil War. His years passed serenely in congenial pursuits, writing for the newspapers on

the topics of the hour (always constructively), in wide reading, in the diversion of mathematics, the care of his affairs, church work (he was junior warden of St. Paul's Episcopal Church for many years, also secretary-treasurer of the vestry), and in the enjoyment of friendships.

One of the friendships of his later years always caused a smile in the family circle, when mentioned—that for Robert Ingersoll. There existed something akin to an attachment between the two men so widely separated by years and temperament, and of such antithetical beliefs. Mr. Ingersoll's atheistic utterances caused his older friend deepest concern. But remonstrances and arguments—which sometimes drew listeners—always ended with: "Well, Mr. Casey, if I am ever converted to religion, I shall join the Episcopal Church out of deference to you."

All proper minded men are generous to their own, but family generosity was a characteristic of Mr. Casey to a degree that is rare. From his children he withheld nothing that he could give. For their beloved mother all that he had was hers as well. When his parents died he waived his share of everything in the East Greenwich home—filled with rarely interesting and beautiful things—in favor of his sisters.

Up to within a few months of his death, Mr. Casey's pen never flagged in its service for the good of his country and State, and for the furthering of the best ideals of living. He had been in vigorous health all his life—indeed, he once boasted that he had not been ill a day in fifty years—and was confined to his bed but for three weeks at the last. The end came without violence and characteristically. When coma had almost overwhelmed him, a nurse entered the room and said softly: "Mrs. Casey, you have eaten nothing all day; tea is served. Won't you come to the table?" Back from the very borderland of the Beyond the dear patient fought his way, and turning his dimming eyes to the white haired lady of his heart, he feebly whispered: "Take something, dear, to sustain you." With this last chivalrous thought the eyes closed, a few more breaths and he was

gone—the star-dust of his life fading into the warm colors of a greater dawn. His earthly remains lie today in Lakeside, the cemetery of Pekin, his home town for fifty years. His son, Edwin A. Casey, some years after his father's death, had placed at the head of two graves a monument which bears no prideful epitaphs, but instead, that which would have been his father's dearest wish. It reads (with only dates added):

Here Lie
John Wanton Casey
and
Elizabeth Moore Morris
His Wife